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THE RHYTHM OF PROSE AND OF FREE VERSE

One of the first principles of the recent writers of free verse is that the long-used fixed forms hamper the poet's thought and conventionalize his originality. In their eagerness to assert their independence of predecessors, the weaker members of the school make poetry the mere jotting down of casual, very casual, thoughts in haphazard rhythm. This method of composition, without principles or standards of form, in reality hinders the development of poetic thought and feeling. The requirement of a certain sense of structure in verse forces the poet to contemplate his idea until it expands with all the richness and beauty he is capable of giving it. The first form in which a thought comes to a poet is usually just the material for a poem; complete freedom of expression tempts him to leave the thought undeveloped, so that he does not bring out all the poetry and feeling the theme really can inspire in him. A great deal of recent work seems to me to be really hints and suggestions, that would not appear so trivial if the poets had developed the significance of these hints. A comparison of some of Emerson's poems with the first drafts in his note-book is an interesting study in showing how the requirement of form made him develop his first idea. Here is a passage from *Seashore*, which is improved in both rhythm and thought:—

“Was ever couch so magnificent as mine? Lie down on
my warm ledges and learn that a very little hut is all you
need. I have made this architecture superfluous, and it is
paltry beside mine.”

Was ever couch magnificent as mine?
Lie on the warm rock-ledges and there learn
A little hut suffices like a town.
I make your sculptured architecture vain,
Vain beside mine. I drive my wedges home,
And carve the coastwise mountains into caves.

I do not wish to argue that the forms of fixed verse are necessary for the development of poetic thought, but that some kind of form is. Free verse is a most musical vehicle for the expression of the poet's feeling, as Arnold, Henley, and Whitman have

shown; but with these masters there were always in view certain standards guiding their changes in rhythm.

Let us see by experiment and analysis whether we can find a few principles that may be useful to the modern writer of free verse. Let us try to determine whether the difference between prose and verse is purely a question of typography; whether we are all modern Jourdain, who have been talking verse all our lives without knowing it. Will the reader be patient enough to read the following passage of prose, trying to decide upon which syllables he puts prominent accents?—

Likewise had he served a year on board a merchantman,
and made himself full sailor, and he thrice had plucked a
life from the dread sweep of the down-streaming seas; and
all men looked upon him favourably. He purchased his own
boat, and made a home for Annie, neat and nestlike, half-
way up the narrow street.

Now what is the difference between the passage as you just read it, and as you read it when it is divided into lines of verse as follows?—

Likewise had he served a year
On board a merchantman, and made himself
Full sailor; and he thrice had plucked a life
From the dread sweep of the down-streaming seas:
And all men looked upon him favourably.
He purchased his own boat and made a home
For Annie, neat and nestlike, halfway up
The narrow street. [Tennyson, *Enoch Arden*.]

As soon as we see the passage printed in this form we unconsciously assume that it is written for verse, and feel that we read it differently. We instinctively try to arrange the paragraph in a kind of pattern which we did not give it before. Each line is divided into five apparently equal time-divisions, and the greater number of the divisions are read with two syllables each. That is, blank verse has an ideal pattern of what we may call duple rhythm repeated five times in each line, and the poet must fit his thought to this ideal scheme. But the usual grouping of the words that express his thought has a rhythm of its own—a prose rhythm. This does not exactly fit the ideal rhythmical scheme of verse. When we read verse we are conscious of

a struggle between these two forces. For instance, a reader of the prose passage might read,—

On board a merchantman and made himself,

with three accents and three time-divisions, but when the same words occur in blank verse he would probably give more value to the syllables *man* and *self*, or even, if he chose, accent them slightly to divide the words into five apparently equal time-parts, thus:—

On board a merchantmān and māde himself.

Again, the words of the fifth line would probably be read as prose in this manner:—

And all mēn looked upon him favourably;

and as verse in this manner:—

And all mēn looked upōn him favourably.

The accent on *men*, which is not required by the ideal verse rhythm, does not interfere with the division into five time-parts.

Sometimes the prose rhythm is so marked that it will not yield to the ideal verse rhythm. The phrase,—

From the dread sweep of the down-streaming seas,

would probably be read by most people in the same way either as verse or prose. We still feel five apparently equal time-divisions, but the rhythm is no longer evenly duple. Our ear, however, accepts this reading as an agreeable change from too constant a regularity.

Verse, then, has an ideal pattern, very largely subjective, of metre and rhythm, to which the poet must fit his thought. If the words fit into the pattern too perfectly, the verse is monotonous; good verse has a constant struggle between the sense of the words as brought out in the prose reading, and the ideal metrical and rhythmical pattern. In this struggle it is the yielding now of one force, now of the other, which gives variety to fixed verse. Prose, of course, having no such ideal framework, must gain its variety from constant changes in the rhythm itself.

Prose has rhythm as well as verse, though prose rhythm is more irregular, and in the ordinary kinds of writing more difficult to perceive. In both there is an approximate equality of time-intervals between stresses, but we are seldom conscious of this equality in prose reading. Furthermore, the lack of a definite rhythmical pattern, the jumping from accented syllable to accented syllable, and the slurring of whatever is between, cause constant changes in tempo in prose reading. The general tempo of average prose reading, or conversation, is somewhat faster than that of average verse reading.

Most readers would, in addition, bring out differences in intensity of emphasis and of pitch in prose reading and verse reading. Prose certainly has a much wider range in both these respects. All these elements—lack of rhythmical pattern and metrical pattern (i. e., the line unit), and a greater variety in tempo, emphasis, and pitch,—tend to obscure the time-parts of prose so that they are subjectively absent; therefore we cannot feel from reading ordinary prose the increased emotional effect which a consciousness of rhythm gives to language.

There is, however, a kind of fine dignified prose which has an emotional quality and a perceptible rhythm. The difference between the solemn measured cadences of Sir Thomas Browne or of the Authorized Version of the Bible and the usual reading of the prose of the newspapers is easy to perceive but difficult to analyse. The following passage from Ecclesiastes is a good example of “rhythmical prose”:

Remémber nów thy Créator in the dāys of thy yóuth,
when the évil dāys come nót nor the yeārs draw nígh
when thou shalt sáy, I háve no pléasure ín them.

The first two words, in my own reading of the passage, start a duple rhythm; from *thy* to *evil* (with the exception of one foot) is in triple rhythm; the rest of the sentence (with the exception of one foot) is in perfect duple rhythm. “Rhythmical prose,” then, we may say, has a slightly varied pattern, which is not superimposed by the addition of light accents, but which is brought out by the usual accent of the words. There is no struggle between the thought and superimposed form. There is,

too, in any good reading of such passages as the above from the Bible, a dignified measured cadence, an equality of time-divisions between the accented syllables. To make this clear, compare your reading of the passage just quoted with the following piece of prose:—

Be sure to go to the harbor at the time of the race, when
the college men are there, for the town is full of fun and
life, though somewhat noisy also.

The average reading of the two passages will have a totally different effect, and yet the distribution of the accented and slurred syllables is, in my own reading, exactly the same in both sentences. This may be made more evident by printing them side by side (the bars preceding the stressed syllables):—

Re-	member	now thy	Cre-	ator in the
Be	sure to	go to the		harbor at the
	days of thy	youth, when the	evil	days come
	time of the	race, when the	college	men are
	not, nor the	years draw	nigh when	thou shalt
	there, for the	town is	full of	fun and
	say, I	have no	pleasure	in them.
	life, though	somewhat	noisy	also.

It is true that the succession of sounds, what is called vowel sequence or tone-color, is not at all alike, but the biblical passage has no words that are unusual, or remarkably beautiful in themselves, and the other sentence is at least free from harsh effects.

This comparison indicates that what we call “rhythmic prose” does not primarily depend for its effect upon the regularity of the rhythmic pattern, though the pattern does, of course, determine the particular character of the rhythm. The ideas of these two passages seem to require different readings. The emotional quality of one impels us to give it a measured cadence, to make time-divisions of our reading perceptibly equal. The lack of this quality in the sentence which merely conveys information makes us fail to give it a measured cadence, or even to bring out distinctly the rhythmic pattern.

That emotional content rather than rhythmic pattern is the important element in "rhythmic prose" may be brought out by comparing a wonderful sentence of Sir Thomas Browne that has no definite rhythmical pattern, with a sentence of a more practical, if less emotional, character. The distribution of the stressed and slurred syllables of both passages is, in the reading of the present writer, identical:—

But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy,
and deals with the memory of men without distinction to
merit of perpetuity.—[*Urn Burial*.]

Through the extraordinary effect of the rise in prices we
are bankrupt, and soon we shall sell at a considerable loss
about twenty of our melodeons.

Here, again, the chief difference in the unforced reading of the two sentences seems to be in the greater evenness of the time-divisions into which our utterance naturally falls because of the dignity of sentiment in Sir Thomas Browne.

The manner of reading the two passages under discussion may of course be reversed. The biblical sentence, or 'that from Sir Thomas Browne, may be read flippantly by giving them the casual unevenness of time-divisions, intensity of emphasis, and of pitch that is natural to newspaper or conversational prose. The other sentences may be made broadly comic by incongruously giving them the dignified even time-parts into which we divide emotional prose. This second reading will have the absurd effect of much campaign speech-making, or the oratory of college debating teams, in which a change in the income tax is urged in cadences proper to the reading of the Ten Commandments.

Suppose we break the sentence from the Bible up into lines so that it looks like free verse:—

Remember now thy Creator
In the days of thy youth,
When the evil days come not,
Nor the years draw nigh
When thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

The biblical verse now becomes a poem, or part of a poem, in the manner of the modern school. The only difference which printing it in this form can make is that most readers would

pause slightly at the end of each line, thus making the rhythmic units more distinct than when the phrases were printed as prose. This, in fact, is what the writers of free verse gain by beginning each line with a capital. The feeling that he is reading verse impels the reader to give more attention to rhythm than he does in reading prose. This is merely another indication that verse rhythm is to a very considerable extent subjective.

Now, if rhythmic prose and free verse are almost exactly the same thing, may we not deduce some useful principles for modern writers from the study of the masters of prose style?

One of the first points to be suggested is the relation of form and subject-matter. We did not read the passage about the crowd at the boat race in the same way as we did "Remember now thy Creator," and the authors of these ideas would not wish to have them read in the same way. If the passage about the race were printed first as free verse we should instinctively try to give it a dignified cadence that would sound ridiculous. Now recent "versifiers" have chosen subjects almost as prosaic, ideas which seem to need either simple statement, or a logical development in an essay, rather than rhythmic emotional expression. I know that a critic is on very dangerous ground when he dares to be dogmatic about the subjects suitable for poetry. But there is a great deal of modern work, of which parts of Mr. Lincoln Colcord's *Vision of War* may be taken as examples, in which the reader constantly feels that rhythmic rhetoric is usurping the province of rational discussion. The author seems to be evading the difficulties of unity and coherence which a logical essay on the subject would impose upon him. This criticism of the themes of free verse has, of course, often been brought even by Walt Whitman's admirers against his less inspired prosaic utterances. Another questionable subject for rhythmic expression seems to me to be the realistic character sketch of Mr. Edgar Lee Masters. The *Spoon River Anthology* contains some of the most forceful and revealing vignettes of human lives that recent literature has produced; but do they gain anything by the form in which they are printed? Is a rhythmic utterance which the form impels us to give them at all appropriate to the subject-matter?

Another point which a study of rhythmic prose brings up is that of variation in rhythm. As there can be no struggle between pattern and thought, as in fixed verse, the rhythms of prose or of free verse must have constant change to avoid monotony. Notice the displeasing effect of the following unvaried triple rhythm:—

Ethereal strength of the Alps, like a dream, that will vanish in solemn procession beyond the Torcellan horizon, and islands of Paduan hills that are poised in the gold of the west.

The flow of the passage as Ruskin wrote it is exquisitely varied:—

Ethereal strength of Alps, dreamlike, vanishing in high procession beyond the Torcellan shore; blue islands of Paduan hills, poised in the golden west.

A similar variation in the flow of rhythm from duple to triple may be seen in Whitman's *Mystic Trumpeter*, a poem that deserves much study from writers of free verse:—

Blow again, trumpeter! And for my sensuous eyes,
Bring the old pageants—show the feudal world.
What charm thy music works! Thou makest pass before me
Ladies and cavaliers long dead—barons are in their castle halls—
troubadours are singing;
Arm'd knights go forth to redress wrongs—some in quest of the
Holy Grail:
I see the tournament—I see the contestants, encased in heavy
armor, seated on stately, champing horses;
I hear the shouts—the sounds of blows and smiting steel:
I see the Crusaders' tumultuous armies—Hark how the cymbals clang!
Lo! where the monks walk in advance, bearing the cross on high!

The rhythm of this passage—and we may say this of all good free verse—has more variation than that of fixed verse, and it has more opportunity for effects suggestive of the thought expressed. The rhythm of the last line quoted is an excellent example of this sort of suggestiveness. Mr. John Gould Fletcher, who has emphasized in one of his prefaces the importance of suggestive rhythm, often exemplifies it admirably, as for instance,—

The rolling and the tossing of the sides of immense pavilions
Under the whirling wind that screams up the cloudless sky;

and again in—

Like cataracts that crash from a crumbling crag
Into the dull-blue smouldering gulf of a lake below.

This change in rhythm to express a change in thought is, of course, a common stylistic effect in fixed verse, but there is not so much room to develop it as there is in free verse or in prose. Stevenson has used it very successfully in the following sentences:—

Time had some score of small voices in that shop, some stately and slow as was becoming to their great age; others garrulous and hurried. All these told out the seconds in an intricate chorus of tickings. Then the passage of a lad's feet, heavily running on the pavement, broke in upon these smaller voices and startled Markheim into the consciousness of his surroundings.

This striving for suggestive rhythms is of the utmost importance in the writing of free verse. It seems to me, in fact, that here is the chief advantage of free verse as a vehicle of expression.

This suggestiveness may be gained by not merely the more obvious imitation of sound or movement, as in the examples just quoted. A sudden change in a rhythm may have the effect of italicizing the thought in the new rhythm, so that the thought becomes subconsciously more suggestive. The two changes in the rhythm of the following from Henley might, I think, emphasize other effects quite as well if given to a different thought in another context:—

The river, jaded and forlorn,
Welters and wanders wearily—wretchedly—on;
Yet in and out among the ribs
Of the old skeleton bridge, as in the piles
Of some dead lake-built city, full of skulls,
Worm-worn, rat-riddled, mouldy with memories. . . .

That is, as I have said before in regard to rhythmical prose, rhythm alone has no absolute objective quality apart from the association with the idea it expresses; it merely emphasizes and adds suggestion to the thought.

If we return to the passage quoted a moment ago from Whitman we find besides variation in rhythm a great variety in length

of line. The line, too, is determined by thought phrases. The long, constantly varying sweeps of rhythmical phrases in De Quincey's dream fugues are other examples of the musical effects possible by this medium. In contrast, one may mention the monotony of a page of rough, unrhymed dimeter or tetrameter that occasionally appears in the work of some of the newer poets. One of the greatest beauties possible in free verse comes from a climactic arrangement of lines, several long sweeps of phrases ending with short striking ones, or several short ones rounded out with the finality which long phrases give.

A parallelism of rhythm, with or without parallelism of thought, gives one of the finest effects in the prose of the Authorized Version. Why should not this be a means of ornamenting free verse? Here is an example from Ecclesiastes, printed in poetic form:—

For mān ālso knōweth nōt his tīme :
 As the fīshes that are tākēn in an ēvil nēt,
 And as the bīrds that are caugh̄t in the snāre ;
 Sō are sōns of mēn,
 Snāred in an ēvil tīme,
 Whēn it fāllefth suddēnly upōn them.

By such effects of repetition and variation in rhythm and line length free verse may gain the advantage of a form of its own, and have the variety and ornament which fixed verse may gain through rhyme and through its ever-present conflict of prose and verse rhythms.

The poet makes a mistake when he tries to produce in free verse a conflict between the sense phrase and the line. Such a conflict is only evident to the eye. The ear cannot perceive the irregular lines of free verse as separate rhythmical units unless they coincide with the phrase. For instance, is there any point at all in the following line division?—

From Bundle's opera house in the village
 To Broadway is a great step,
 But I tried to take it, my ambition fired
 When sixteen years of age,
 Seeing "East Lynn" played here in the village
 By Ralph Barret, the coming
 Romantic actor, who enthralled my soul.

A successful handling of run-on lines in free verse is only possible when the line is made distinct by rhyme. This may be done either by an occasional echo of rhyme, merely occurring often enough to give a slight suggestion of form to the poem, or by a complete scheme of interwoven rhymes which builds up a real structure. This second plan Henley used with rare effect in—

Where, in what other life,
Where, in what old spent star,
Systems ago, dead vastitudes afar,
Were we two bird and bough, or man and wife?
Or wave and spar?
Or I the beating sea, and you the bar
On which it breaks? I know not, I!
But this, O this, my very dear, I know:
Your voice awakes old echoes in my heart;
And things I say to you now are said once more;
And, sweet, when we two part,
I feel I have seen you falter and linger so,
So hesitate, and turn, and cling—yet go,
As once in some immemorable Before,
Once on some fortunate yet thrice-blasted shore,
Was it for good?
O, these poor eyes are wet;
And yet, O, yet,
Now that we know, I would not, if I could,
Forget.

Rhyme is an ornament which the latest versifiers have not quite rejected, but are inclined to use only when it suits their convenience. They should remember that the ears of their readers are trained in the old forms of fixed verse, and that whenever their work approaches the old forms, the lack of rhyme startles and disappoints us. The effect is not that of an interesting novelty, but of something crudely unfinished. An example may be found in the following, where the unrhymed last word of the stanza in the old accustomed "common metre" hits us like a blow:—

The days went by like shadows,
The minutes wheeled like stars,
She took the pity from my heart,
And made it into smiles.

The freedom which leads to such unpleasant effects seems to me very unfortunate.

I have tried to point out a few ways in which the new movement in verse may, by a study of the rhythms of great prose, develop a finer sense of artistic effect. Free verse, like any other form of art, must have its principles. Haphazard expression without standards can never produce work of value. It will be a great pity for people who think their emotions interesting, to feel that they can write poetry between the newspaper and breakfast, now that poetry is easier to do than it used to be. Unless the modern school develops some principles of length and flow of rhythms, and some sense of grouping, of climax,—of form,—they will have only the temporary vogue of startling novelty.

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